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The Holy Grail of Organizational Change

Toward Gender Equality at Work

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After 30 years of feminist research and actions, we still have not reached the Holy Grail of gender equality at work. In this chapter, we theorize one of the major problems today: the slow progress toward gender equality in contemporary work organizations. Such a theory contributes to the general interdisciplinary field of gender studies, fitting in particular into the subfield of "gendered organizations," which is at the crossroads of (critical) management and organization studies and gender studies. Concepts such as gender regimes or inequality regimes have been helpful to understanding the systematic, overall pattern of interlocked practices and processes of gender, class, and race relations in organizations continuously producing inequalities (Acker 2006; Connell 2006). Yet the academic knowledge on how to make changes toward gender equality¹ in organizations has lagged seriously behind. This chapter sets out to contribute to the development of a feminist theory of change toward gender equality in organizations.²

We start by identifying the different actors involved in organizational change toward gender equality and their take on the subject. Several authors have hinted that the academic–practitioner divide hinders fruitful knowledge exchange and collaboration (Benschop and Verloo 2011; De Vries 2015; Kulik 2014). This divide between feminist research and activism is apparent in other fields such as violence against women and education. Yet in the context of organizations it seems that a rather strict division of labor occurred between the academy and practice, with practitioners in the mud of organizational change, academics in the ivory tower of analysis, and consultants running up and down the stairs to connect the two. These major players all seem to have their own per-

spectives on organizational change toward gender equality. As Connell (2006, 837) notes, “The way we think about gender is a key to the way we act on gender reform.” We examine the local gender knowledge (Cavaghan 2012) of these different actors.

We argue that there is a politics to this local gender knowledge, in the sense that some bits of knowledge are seen as more legitimate and visible and carry more weight with decision makers on organizational change. This affects the progress of change and should be taken into account in any theory of change. These are the two core questions of our chapter: How do different key actors envision organizational change toward gender equality? How do their perspectives facilitate or hinder change toward gender equality in organizations? The answers to those questions relate to the politics of knowledge and contribute to a theory of change toward gender equality generally.

We distinguish between two groups of actors involved in creating knowledge for theory and the practice of change processes toward gender equality in organizations: academics theorizing organizational change and consultants researching and advising organizations to change. We note that of course the boundaries between these two perspectives are blurred and that there are academics who engage in consultancy and consultants who cross over to academia. In order to capture the local gender knowledge available, we analyze academic writings and consultancy reports on organizational change toward gender equality. We access the practitioner perspective in this chapter through the academic and consultancy publications about practices of change and the role of organizational change agents, such as diversity professionals, managers, ambassadors, or champions (Kirton, Greene, and Dean 2007). It is clearly beyond the scope of a single chapter to discuss all the local gender knowledge available. Therefore, we focus on three core issues that feature most prominently in current writings about organizational change toward gender equality and are presented as the crucial elements of any attempt to change. The first issue concerns the change of organizational cultures and structures. When thinking about changing gendered cultures and structures, specific issues arise around the commitment of top management (second issue) and the engagement of men in change efforts (third issue).

Short Note on Methodology

To provide a comprehensive and critical review of the literature on gender/diversity and organizational change, we conducted a series of searches using the Institute for Scientific Information’s Web of Knowledge database. We used the following keywords in different combinations: organizational change, gender equality, diversity, inclusion, commitment, top management, leadership, champions, engaging men, men in gender equality, organizational culture change, structural change organizations. To cover books and book chapters as well, we additionally searched on Google Scholar with similar keywords. We refined our search to select material published in the period 1995–2015 because (a) an analysis of the first selection of publications showed a growing academic interest in changing organizations from 1995 onwards, and (b) similarly the data show that the year also corresponds to the time when diversity research started to proliferate in management studies (Özbilgin et al. 2011). The vast majority of the articles and book chapters we found documented and analyzed gender *inequalities* in various sectors of the labor market, from sports to the financial sector, and from health care to development. In contrast, we were looking for academic work that specifically and explicitly centered on instruments for or accounts of organizational *change* programs or projects on gender inequalities. We therefore only included academic publications that concern actual organizational change efforts toward gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. By going through these publications and their reference lists, we added publications that were considered relevant but that had not showed up in our initial search. The result is a vast array of publications on gender and change in organizations from different disciplines and perspectives.

For consultancy publications, we identified global consultancy firms that publish research and advice about gender equality change projects. Two such companies regularly report on gender equality: Catalyst and McKinsey, both originally from the United States but also active across the Western world. We searched their websites and publications to identify reports on strategies for creating inclusive cultures or workplaces, or both, including changing organizational cultures and ways to engage men in gender equality work. Our analysis begins with a review of the

competing perspectives of academia and consultants regarding organizational change toward gender equality.

Changing Organizational Processes

The first key issue we discuss concerns the different perspectives of academics and consultants on changing organizational processes. For academics, the focus on organizational processes was a new alternative strategy for creating gender equality in organizations, differing from earlier approaches such as “fixing the women” and “valuing differences” (for an overview of approaches, see Ely and Meyerson 2000). Both are strategies focused on the individual that forget to target the organizational cultures and structures that reproduce the hierarchical valuing of gender difference in organizations (Meyerson and Kolb 2000; Zanoni et al. 2010). Acker (2006) was one of the pioneers arguing that organizations systematically produce inequality because organizational structures and cultures are not gender neutral. Ely and Meyerson (2000) argued that making the workplace more inclusive entails a postequity approach that changes core organizational processes, beliefs, cultures, routines, and structures. Changing these taken-for-granted organizational routines and practices attempts to undermine the roots of inequality by fundamentally altering the way work is defined, executed, and evaluated (Ely and Meyerson 2000). This approach advocated action research and close collaboration with organizational “change agents” to change gendered structures and cultures as the most effective way to enhance gender equality (Liff and Cameron 1997; Nentwich 2006). Little empirical work has been published on how exactly these organizational processes can be changed (Benschop et al. 2012; De Vries 2010), and which initiatives and practices have proven the most effective in different settings (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). The research that does exist mainly highlights the reasons for the limited success of change initiatives (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre 2008; Liff and Cameron 1997).

Another strand of literature that focuses on changing organization processes stems from (critical) diversity studies and uses the concept of inclusion (Holvino, Ferdman, and Merrill-Sands 2004; Mor-Barak and Cherin 1998; Roberson 2006). Inclusion shifts attention to creating

an organizational context in which everybody feels like an insider and “encompasses involvement, engagement, and the integration of diversity into organizational processes” (Roberson 2006, 228). These changes in organizational processes must lead to an inclusive culture in which employees must be able to both bring their “uniqueness” to work and have a feeling of belonging (Shore et al. 2011). Organizations that are inclusive involve employees in critical organizational processes such as decision making (Mor-Barak and Cherin 1998), encourage equal treatment of all employees, and simultaneously recognize and acknowledge individual differences (Zanoni and Janssens 2007). In line with the literature on organizational processes described above, work on inclusiveness has not yet yielded comprehensive knowledge about how to create such an inclusive culture. An exception is inductive identification of the organizational practices that foster the valuing of multiple competencies (uniqueness) and the ability to express multiple identities (belongingness), two key markers of inclusiveness (Janssens and Zanoni 2014).

All in all, the academic perspective on organizational change toward gender equality advocates transformational change of organizational structures and cultures. The core idea is that persistent inequalities and their underlying power processes can be changed only if organizational processes are transformed, because the interventions geared at changing individual employees or managers will leave the gendered system intact.

The emphasis on organizational processes, culture, and inclusiveness is also reflected in consultancy reports. Catalyst published a series of reports on inclusive workplaces and cultures (Catalyst 2015), introducing change models that are applied to member organizations. These models are based on literature on organizational change, but they hardly engage research from academic gender and diversity studies. As a consequence, these reports use the concept of inclusiveness and inclusion as key but fail to clarify what an inclusive culture entails. For instance, one report introduces a model for creating inclusive workplaces that includes leadership, change commitment, and developing a business case. This report builds on field-based insights about the effective management of change initiatives. However, no specific attention is paid to what inclusiveness entails.

McKinsey’s *Women Matter* report (McKinsey 2015) focuses on gender equality at the top of corporations. A study of 1,400 managers from a

wide range of companies worldwide points toward the need to create an “ecosystem” of measures including strong chief executive officer/top management commitment, human resource policies, development programs, and performance indicators on diversity. In addition, the report suggests that gaps in the corporate culture and mind-sets can be addressed by “inclusive programs” that can build awareness among men about the greater difficulties women face in reaching the top. These inclusiveness programs thus seem to be focused on bias training for men.

Summarizing, we observe that the perspective of consultants presents inclusive cultures in a positive light, primarily as good for business, and remains largely silent about gender inequalities and underlying power processes. Inclusiveness equates to women’s participation at the decision-making table, a participation in business as usual without changing the gender order.

Creating inclusive workplaces and changing core organizational processes have been a dominant topic in both academic and consultancy literature. Both stress the need to change organizational practices and beliefs, such as leadership and cultural notions about the quality of employees. In the academic literature changes in practices and beliefs are needed to counter power inequalities; in consultancy publications, changes are geared to the realization of members’ full human potential, ultimately providing competitive advantage to the employer. Neither academic nor consultancy publications have answers for how to accomplish these difficult change efforts, but consultancy reports have a more positive and instrumental tone of voice, and they propose models and stories to show that change is possible. This pattern may be related to the fact that consultancies’ core business is selling advice to corporations. The need to sell advice limits the opportunities for profound critique or acknowledgment that change is difficult and multifaceted. Consultants may play down critique because it is risky to bite the hand that feeds. Also, an inclusive workplace, in the consultants’ view, is a workplace with women participating in top management. Inclusion is thus restricted to giving women a boost up the ladder, leaving intact the ladder that hindered them in the first place (Cockburn 1989). Contradictorily, the academic literature targets that ladder, emphasizing the difficulties that arise when changing organizational processes, structures, and cultures. These studies have been critiqued for not being practically

oriented and lacking guidelines on how to make organizations more gender equal (Benschop et al. 2012). Another striking difference is that consultants talk about the fashionable topic of inclusiveness but do not explicate what it is beyond mere participation. They hardly address “belonging” and “uniqueness,” both of which are central to the academic notion of inclusion among diversity scholars.

Commitment from the Top

The second core issue is the commitment of top management. Turning to academic literature about organizational change generally and gender equality more specifically, the premise of the commitment of top management stands out. This commitment is seen as important not only because of symbolic effects but also because it increases the odds that equality actions are taken. The importance of top management support for diversity is highlighted in the diversity literature (DiTomaso and Hooijberg 1996, 169), but what this support entails is not elaborated.

The commitment of top management to gender equality, diversity, and inclusion is expected to lead to diversity practices and outcomes (Dansky et al. 2003; Leo and Barton 2006). Studies on the leadership of organizational change efforts point to leaders’ responsibilities as shapers and framers of organizations and to their role as champions for equality and diversity in their organizations (Ng 2008). Van den Brink (2015) argues that, for successful gender interventions, leaders must prioritize gender equality, create a sense of urgency, provide financial and personnel resources, and display gender-aware leadership. Scholars also point to tensions between commitment and action. Some studies show that leaders may express positive attitudes toward gender equality as a principle but resist when it comes to concrete actions (Wahl and Holgersson 2003). This suggests that the commitment of top management to gender equality is not self-evident. Commitment may be only of a rhetorical nature, as it seems to be a challenge to engage leaders into action that goes beyond sloganism (Cox and Blake 1991), verbal and symbolic support (Holvino, Ferdman, and Merrill-Sands 2004), or lip service (Benschop 2000).

All in all, academic literature generally underlines the importance of commitment by top management for gender equality change. Yet, in most studies, leadership commitment is problematized, and no studies

confirm that leadership is a success factor for change. This means that we need to develop more knowledge about how and when leadership makes a difference in gender equality change.

The claim that leadership is crucial can also be found in any consultancy report on gender equality. Both Catalyst and McKinsey frame the commitment of top management as a *sine qua non* condition for change to happen. The chief executive officer (CEO) is seen as the primary role model who must be involved for the rest of the organization to follow his/her example. Catalyst emphasizes a transformational leadership style in which leaders communicate about the vision, establish coalitions, empower the change agents, and negotiate conflicts. McKinsey stresses that senior executives need to tell stories, preferably personal and emotional ones, about their engagement, experiences, and beliefs about gender diversity to strengthen the case for diversity and to prompt more people to commit to it. Interestingly, consultancy reports typically lack information about the concrete actions that top managers must take in order to act upon this commitment. They are vague about actions needed from leadership to advance gender equality. After all, any change project benefits from a transformational, visionary leader who sets a strategy, tells stories, and empowers the change agents. Two core issues are silenced in this nostalgic call for a strong leader. One is that men who care enough about gender equality to act upon it are as scarce as the men and masculinities literature on organizations illustrates (Collinson and Hearn 1994; Connell 1987; Martin 2001). The second is the naïveté of relying on a strong leader and a top-down approach to organizational change. The latter overestimates the relative power of a leader in multifaceted and complex organizational change processes.

Commitment from the top for organizational change toward gender equality is, in our view, an underresearched premise. Specification as to what this commitment of top management to gender and diversity change initiatives actually entails is lacking in both academia and consultancy. Furthermore, it is striking that the importance of commitment at the top is so readily and widely accepted when change projects are often initiated elsewhere. Unions, for instance, play a role in advancing gender equality in organizations through collective bargaining (Kirton and Healy 2013). Diversity networks and employee affinity groups in organizations are drivers for change (Dennissen, Benschop, and Van

den Brink 2014). And, finally, some governments, notably Norway, enforce quota laws to increase the number of women in top management positions.

Engaging Men

The third issue in changing organizations is the engagement of men in gender equality initiatives. This relates to the issue of commitment at the top, as top managers tend to be men, but it goes beyond the top layers of management to the involvement of all men. This issue has gained momentum in academic work, particularly in more recent years. Connell (2005, 1801) notes how gender equality was placed on the agenda of society, politics, and management by women, but stresses that men are necessarily involved in gender equality reform because widespread support from both women and men is required. Furthermore, current power relations have men in the control seat. As such, men act as gatekeepers for gender equality (Connell 2005, 1802) and as the purported drivers and champions of gender change (De Vries 2015). However, Wahl (2014) notes that male managers with basic levels of gender awareness do not necessarily “have the required competence, or will, actually to become change-agents and initiate organizational change” (143). Another rationale for engaging men reflects the belief that women who push for gender equality are biased and primarily self-interested, whereas men can do so from an impartial standpoint with only the best interest of the organization in mind (Van den Brink 2015). Ironically, this casts men as the more legitimate champions of gender equality and adds another layer to the marginalization of women. De Vries (2015) offers a more nuanced account, seeing two sides to this claim. On the one hand, the call for engaging men can be framed as a way to make gender change an organizational problem instead of a woman’s problem, stressing the organization’s responsibility and accountability for gender change in organizations. On the other hand, De Vries stresses that engaging men cannot be set apart from gendered notions of leadership that privilege men, notions that strengthen rather than undermine the gendered status quo. Her study of Australian executives championing a gender change process shows the complexities of gendered leadership of change in organizations.

The classic feminist adage that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde 2003) still features in the background of discussions of engaging men in gender equality changes. Yet reducing men to protectors of male privilege is a simplified representation of men's role in organizational change. It fails to do justice to their importance in successful change and the genuine engagement of some men in gender equality efforts (see, for instance, McKearney 2014), to the disadvantages men face in the gendered division of labor (Connell 2005), or to the perils of masculine stereotypes for men who do dangerous work when guided by macho masculinity norms (Ely and Meyerson 2010). Indeed, such categorical thinking obscures the profound differences between men and the multiplicity of masculinities (Collinson and Hearn 1994; Martin 2001), with some benefitting from the privileges and others bearing the costs of gender inequality and with some actively advocating and others actively resisting gender change. Several studies recognize and encourage strategic alliances between women and men as the way forward for gender change in their organizations (Benschop and Verloo 2006; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012).

Summarizing, the academic literature acknowledges the need to engage men in gender equality change. Academic visions differentiate between men and masculinities, differentiating between men who benefit and those who experience the disadvantages of gender inequality. It is the latter group that is expected to contribute to changing organizations.

Turning to the consultancy publications, we find similar arguments for engaging men, such as the mutual responsibility of women and men for gender equality change, and the leadership positions of men. McKinsey (2015) reports on how the low level of engagement of men, men's less favorable perceptions of women's leadership abilities, and men's skepticism about the value of diversity initiatives are important barriers to cultural change toward gender equality. They emphasize the necessity to move mind-sets, stating that "ultimately, what is good for women will also be good for men—and for corporations" (7), but without further substantiation. Catalyst has made the engagement of men a cornerstone of their activities, publishing multiple reports and tools on the subject of engaging men (Catalyst 2015). Their key arguments are that men are a largely untapped resource, and that male champions can be role mod-

els who influence other men who are not convinced of equality. The reports result from a hybrid collaboration between Catalyst researchers and gender studies academics, pairing scholarly research to consultancy advice. The research exposes restrictive masculine norms that affect men in organizations, identifies barriers (apathy, fear, ignorance) that prevent men from taking action, and offers ideas on how to raise men's awareness of gender inequality by defying some masculine norms, encouraging men to mentor women, and promoting a strong sense of fair play. Catalyst presents concrete actions men can take to create an inclusive workplace, and has developed a Diversity and Inclusion training program to increase men's gender awareness, examining what drives men's interest in training and the perceived effects of a specific training program on the attitudes and behavior of white men toward inclusion.

Summarizing, the consultants stress that men have to and can be engaged in gender equality work when they are made aware of the benefits that gender equality has for them. While some publications analyze masculine norms and inequalities, they remain largely silent about the loss of privilege that comes with the change.

Engaging men in gender equality change is thus a topic of debate in both the consultancy and scholarly literatures. Academics tend to acknowledge the legacies of feminism, the women's movement, and feminist scholarship that complicate men's involvement in gender equality change projects (Hearn 2014). In the consultancy publications we observe a preferred presentation of gender equality as a win-win project benefitting men as well as women and not as a zero-sum game that only women benefit from and men stand to lose. Further theorizing is necessary to substantiate these benefits for men, as changing inequalities inevitably calls for a redivision of power along gender lines, and thus some men will have to give up privileges. Simultaneously, the lack of progress on gender equality at work gives rise to the development of strategies to include men in gender change projects. Especially alluring is involving men in leadership positions to advance gender equality and move the project forward energetically. Of course new complexities and dilemmas develop around what De Vries (2015) calls the gendered nature of executive leadership for gender change and, more practically, around the gender awareness or lack thereof of the men who lead.

Facilitating or Hindering Change?

Now that we have analyzed the perspectives of the key actors on three core issues, we come to the second research question: How do the different perspectives facilitate or hinder change toward gender equality in organizations? Academics tend to focus on the persistent and systematic nature of gender inequality, and have little to say on how to change inequalities. As for the consultants' perspective, they have a lot to say about changing organizations, providing tools to change organizations to a certain extent, but without addressing the issues of power and inequality.

Our position is that organizational change toward gender equality is hindered by the politics of knowledge inherent in both perspectives. Politics drive academics to problematize organizational processes to build theoretical contributions. Theory gets them published in international A+ journals, often leading to inaccessible jargon that escapes practical significance (Sinclair 2004). Even with open access publishing on the rise, the focus on theoretical contributions is hindering dissemination among a wider nonacademic public. An incentive to bridge the gap to practice is lacking when academic survival depends on international top publications as an end in itself, and not as a means to create knowledge that can be used by change agents in organizations to make a difference. Kulik (2014) argues that academics fail to deliver on the knowledge needs of practitioners.

Consultants are also tied to their politics of knowledge, regulated by the neoliberal commercialism of the business market. They seek to be hired by the powers that be, and thus are immediately implicated in the management of the organizations they work for, even if they are presented as the outside innovators of business (Sturdy et al. 2009). Consultants refrain from drastic critique or measures. They need to keep their clients happy either as a matter of self-policing to secure the business relation, as a response to clients' refusal of all too critical measures, or as a form of impression management promoting their capability to make organizations change. Whereas scholars can boast academic independence, consultants need to produce palatable results, preferably in the form of practical toolkits, checklists, and in-step recipes.

We thus note that the knowledge in both perspectives is limited. The different goals of academia and consultancy hinder interchange and

crossover between academic and consultancy knowledge. So, we are left with the question of whether a feminist theory of organizational change for gender equality calls for a critical dialogue between academics and consultants.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is to contribute to the development of a feminist theory of change toward gender equality in organizations. We have shown that current theories about changing organizations toward gender equality are hindered by the politics of knowledge among both academics and consultants. Academic research lacks tangible starting points to bring about change. Consultants sell positive stories about the possibilities for organizational change by providing clear-cut models and recipes. Yet their understanding of cultural change valorizes change accelerators and key milestones, but fails to specify what constitutes these accelerators and milestones for gender change. Since there is no one-size-fits-all change recipe for all organizations, theoretical work should be informed by situated knowledge from the inside of organizations. We thus argue that the knowledge from both groups of actors is necessary to develop a feminist theory that can actually be useful for changing gender regimes in organizations.

In order to ensure the mutual learning and collaboration of the different actors, we need to work with the politics of knowledge. Multiple perspectives are needed to grasp the complexity of change both theoretically and practically. For feminist academics, this means a more pronounced engagement with practical change agendas as well as with theoretical contributions. The work of feminist consultants would benefit from a more realistic perspective on nonlinear, messy, and complex change processes. Commitment to feminist principles may help to bridge the two perspectives, since they share the quest for the Holy Grail of gender equality. Because of these shared goals, we are optimistic about the opportunities for collaboration between feminist academics and feminist consultants. Action research projects provide a learning environment in which collaboration can thrive when both parties are willing to transcend their own perspectives, to be open to not-knowing, and to explore new roads to organizational change.

We conclude that a feminist theory of change needs to target organizational processes that reproduce gender inequalities, needs the commitment of top management, and the active engagement of both women and men. In Connell's terms, this means a change in the gender division of labor, in gender relations of power, and in gender culture and symbolism (Connell 2002). We concur with Connell (2005, 1819) who emphasizes the need for widespread social support for gender equality and wants to treat men systematically as agents in gender equality processes in organizations. After all, both women and men stand to gain from changing gender relations in hegemonic masculine cultures that can be dysfunctional and dangerous (Ely and Meyerson 2010). We have demonstrated that we currently are missing in-depth knowledge on the form of leadership required to realize this kind of gender change. The issue is preeminently an area for dialogue and collaboration between academics and consultants who are driven by a feminist agenda. They can collectively provide insights into the specificity of gender change processes in comparison to other change agendas. This will help us understand which strategies, interventions, and actions of leaders are needed and what dilemmas they encounter. We realize that overcoming the politics of knowledge is no easy endeavor, but one that just may set us on the right path to the Holy Grail.

NOTES

- 1 We define gender equality in organizations as the equal access of participants to power and control over goals, resources, outcomes, influence on decisions, opportunities, security and benefits, and pleasures (cf. Acker 2006).
- 2 We would like to thank the editors and especially Pat Martin for her thoughtful comments and suggestions to improve this chapter.

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